

The BLACK
STALLION
and the Shape-shifter



KELPIE (KEL-pee)

noun, a water spirit of Celtic folklore
reputed to cause drownings
(1740, origin uncertain)



THE BEACH

THE BLACK STALLION raced along the beach at the water's edge, spray flying from his hooves. Alec Ramsay pressed himself flat against his horse's neck. Riding bareback, he was crouching high and tight and perfectly balanced, guiding the stallion with soft pressure from his hands and legs. Slowly he eased the Black out of his gallop, to a trot, and then a walk.

Tossing his head, Alec sat up and flicked his red hair out of his eyes. Gray predawn light shone over the sand dunes on one side of him and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. Out to sea a distant line of fog blurred the horizon where the ocean met the sky.

This was nice, Alec thought. He took in another deep breath of sea air and blinked his tired eyes. He'd been up late last night and barely slept an hour before he and the Black left New York's Belmont Park at four o'clock this morning. After an hour's drive, he arrived at his friend Pete Murray's riding academy, located

next to this wildlife refuge on the coast of Long Island. The reason for coming here was to pick up a yearling colt Pete wanted moved up to Hopeful Farm. Alec was vanning the Black back to the farm today, so he'd offered to bring the chestnut-colored colt along with them. But when Pete realized he had misplaced some of the yearling's medical records, he suggested Alec take the Black for a ride on the beach. It would give them something to do while he searched through his files for the missing papers.

Alec looked out to sea, letting his sleepy gaze drift away into the distance. The fog on the horizon was moving closer now. The wind was still. Just offshore a fishing boat motored west toward New York Harbor, trailed by a flock of seagulls.

The weather was cool for early summer, cool enough to send a chill up Alec's back. His shirt was damp with sweat. Seawater dripped from his bare feet and calves. His blue jeans were rolled up to his calves, his shoes back at Pete's stable with the Black's saddle and bridle. Alec slid his hands gently over his horse's neck, warming his chilled fingers in the pocket of warmth under the stallion's mane.

How long had it been since he'd gone for a ride with the Black on the beach like this? Alec asked himself. More than a year at least. Yet somehow it seemed

like only yesterday, comfortable and familiar. Alec wondered about that and decided the reason must be because riding on the beach always brought back memories of his first days with the Black, when they were shipwrecked together on a deserted island off the coast of Spain. How could he ever forget that time, his first wary encounters with the Black and their struggle for survival there?

Much had changed since those magical days on the island and his first wild rides on the Black. He had changed. The Black had changed. They were both older now. The Black was a mature stallion, well into his teens, a legend at the racetrack and a proven sire of stakes-winning colts and fillies. Alec was a breeder of horses and a professional jockey with hundreds of rides under his belt. Yet the bond between them remained. It was something unique and difficult to describe, a sense of “oneness” that Alec felt with no other horse. Long ago he’d given up trying to explain it to people, especially those caught up in the hard-boiled, twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week world of professional horse racing.

Putting his attention back on his horse, Alec gave the Black a pat on the neck and urged the stallion forward. Ahead of them was a bend in the shoreline. The Black tossed his head, eager to run another mile or so.

“Easy, fella,” Alec said, holding the Black to a walk. “We’re going to have to turn back pretty soon. Let’s just see what’s around this bend.”

The stallion skipped into motion. Alec gave the Black his head and moved with him, burying his face in the streaming mane. The world sped by in a blur, everything fluid around them, everything in motion. Alec bent himself against his horse and the Black carried him faster and faster, carrying him far away, carrying him all the way back to those first days on the island once again. . . .

When Alec pulled the stallion up finally and turned to look out to sea, the sky seemed darker suddenly, despite the early-dawn light. At first he thought perhaps a storm was blowing in from somewhere. Then he realized the fog he’d seen offshore earlier was much closer now, already sweeping over the rocky point and swallowing up the beach around him. The birds, the fishing boat and everything else out to sea were gone. Ocean and sky blended together into one great field of smoky gray. In seconds the low-hanging mist was so thick that Alec could hear but not see the waves as they washed up on the sand only a few yards away.

“We should head back before we get totally lost in this soup,” Alec said, angry with himself for not paying more attention to the changing weather. The Black

gave a snort as Alec turned him around and started back toward the point.

As they rode along, Alec noticed that the blanket of fog brought with it a strange quiet. It softened the rumbling surf and the squeaky-wheel crying of the seagulls hovering overhead. Even the blowing of the Black's breath, the swish of his tail, sounded far away now. The misty cushion of fog surrounding them was making Alec feel sleepier than ever.

The Black seemed fascinated by the fog as he moved cautiously along, his ears pricked, his head held high. Alec had sense enough to know that the smart thing to do now was to take it easy and trust the Black to lead the way back. "Okay, big guy," Alec said. "It's up to you now. You get us back to Pete's and I'll do my best not to fall asleep along the way."

They walked another minute through the fog when suddenly Alec could feel the Black tensing up. Instinctively he snapped to attention just as the stallion bounced to a stop. Alec took up a double helping of mane in his fists. The Black threw his head, then rocked back on his hind legs.

"Easy, boy," Alec said, leaning forward to regain his balance. "There is nothing there. Easy now. Probably just some birds."

Alec waited a few moments, then gave the Black a nudge with his heels. The stallion ignored him and

remained still, staring intently into the fog. The signals Alec was receiving from the Black now were impossible to mistake. The stiff tension could mean only one thing. Danger.

Alec listened. Maybe someone was there. But who could it be at this early hour? A fisherman? A park ranger perhaps? The disquieting thought crossed Alec's mind that horseback riding might not be totally legal here. Many places on Long Island didn't allow dogs on the beach, much less horses. Surely Pete would have warned him if horseback riding was unlawful on this stretch of beach. Then again, Alec thought, maybe not. Pete could be a real joker sometimes.

The Black pawed the sand and whistled. Alec steadied his horse and listened again. There was something there. Now he could hear it too, a muffled drumming sound, like hoofbeats. Could it be another horse? Alec wondered. Out here?

The idea suddenly occurred to him that Pete might have saddled a horse and come looking for him. "Hey, Pete," he called. "Is that you?"

No one answered.

Alec strained his eyes in the fog and called out one more time. "Pete? Hello? Is anyone out there?"

Again there was no reply, only the pattering sound, coming closer and closer. They were hoofbeats, Alec felt certain now. But where were they coming

from? At first the drumming seemed to be coming from the side, then from behind, then in front, then from the direction of the sea. Even the Black seemed confused, tilting his ears one way, then another, as if unable to pinpoint the source of the sound in the pale curtains of sea mist.

A draft of wind brought the odor of seaweed, a smell so sour it caught in Alec's throat and made him gag. Wisps of fog swirled around him. It sizzled and cracked in his ears like the sound of burning grass. From somewhere nearby came a faint sound of tinkling bells, like wind chimes in a breeze.

All at once, the sounds stopped and all he could hear was the lapping of the waves on the shore. Then, from the corner of his eye, Alec saw a shape materialize in the fog beside him. The Black spun around. Startled by the sudden apparition, the stallion screamed and shifted his weight back onto his hindquarters, his body tight as a coiled spring.

It was a girl riding a horse, a magnificent black stallion, one nearly as big as the Black himself, his coat splashed with water and glistening like a raven's wing. The stallion turned to face Alec, slowly, deliberately, its large eyes red-rimmed, wide and staring. The girl rode hunched painfully over the horse's neck, her arms thrust deep into the raven-colored mane. She lifted her head and her long, dark hair fell back from the pale

oval of her face. Their eyes met for only a brief moment, but in that instant Alec could plainly see the terror there. Her mouth was open and she seemed to be pleading to him, trying to call out but unable to find her voice.

“Hey,” Alec called. “Are you all right?” The girl still did not answer and suddenly the Black threw his head and screamed again. Alec struggled to keep the Black under control as the girl and her horse swept down the beach to vanish among the misty veils of fog. Before Alec knew what was happening his stallion plunged after them. Alec called to the girl again, but the only reply was the sound of splashing in the shallows.

The Black followed the splashing sounds through the shifting layers of mist. Up ahead, Alec could just make out the forms of the girl and her horse moving out into the deeper water. He watched in disbelief as they sank lower, to their shoulders, and then their heads. An instant later the water closed over them and they were gone, leaving only ripples on the surface to testify that they were ever there at all.

Alec stared into the fog, startled and shaken. The Black back-stepped through the water and screamed again. “Easy, boy,” Alec said when he found his voice. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

But it was not okay, Alec knew. He blinked his

eyes. That girl. What happened to her? Blinded by the sea mist, he listened intently for some clue to tell him that what he'd just seen was real. But all he could hear was the crackling of the waves washing over the sand.

From off the land, a sudden breeze rose up. As quickly as it had descended, the fog began to blow out to sea, taking most of the smell of seaweed with it. Soon Alec could see the waves once more. Offshore were birds, the fishing boat, and the fog retreating toward the horizon. But of the girl and the mysterious black horse, he could see not a trace.